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ABSTRACT

By participating in their children's imaginative play or pretending, parents may be able to understand better their children's feelings, resolve parent-child conflicts, communicate parental values, and build parent-child relationships based on mutual respect. Many people seem to believe that pretending appears automatically in young children, that it represents a way to escape reality, and that it is easy. These beliefs are false. Far from being a retreat from reality, imaginative play is a crucial mechanism by which children survive the onslaught of new information. Pretending is an essentially social, learned skill by which children cope with reality. For children between the ages of 2 and 6, imaginative play is a major vehicle for developing social and language skills as well as an understanding of personal relationships. Pretending helps children recognize the dimensions of new facts they have discovered about life, some of which are exciting, some frightening. It is a form of thinking that helps children deal with the complex and difficult intellectual task of distinguishing between the real and the imaginary. Recent research indicates that high levels of pretending are associated with cooperativeness, self control, and intelligence. This research also demonstrates that helping children elaborate their pretending has the effect of increasing their social, emotional, and intellectual development. (Author/RH)

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THE VALUE OF PRETENDING

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Mandy, a talkative three year old, has just created a car by
tipping over one of the kitchen chairs. Now she speaks to the
three dolls who are propped up in the car:

We're going to see Small World.
We're going to ride the horses and ride Dumbo..
But we're not going to Haunted Mansion.
It's too scary. Those ghosts scare me.

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On the way to Disneyworld Mandy pulls into a make believe gas
station. "We won't run out of gas," she assures the dolls. Ar-
riving at their destination Mandy asks her mother to make name tags
for each of the dolls--in case they get lost in the crowd. Then
she carries them into the living room, announcing "Let's go see
Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse."

As adults it is fun to eavesdrop on the pretending of young
children. Perhaps we recall vague memories of our own childish
fantasies. The charm of imaginative play is unmistakable, and
yet too often we miss the skill and self control that also is
implicit in this kind of play. We take for granted, and only
casually appreciate, the feats that our children perform when they
pretend.

Many people seem to believe that pretending appears automatically
in young children. In fact, however, it is a learned skill and
flourishes when adults and older children serve as models and
facilitators. Pretending begins in imitation and more advanced
ideas usually are worked out through interaction with others. The
essentially social character of make believe can be seen even when
children play by themselves. Like Mandy, who had no desire to
travel alone, children substitute imaginary companions for real
ones. Pretending is something to be done with other people, and

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children who have plentiful opportunities to share fantasies with adult and peer friends demonstrate a more sophisticated kind of play.

Imaginative play between the ages of two and six is a major vehicle for developing social skills and an understanding of personal relationships. On one level children can focus on imaginary friendships with dolls, stuffed animals, or even invisible playmates. These imaginary friends are always there when needed, always ready to go along with any idea, always willing to offer sympathy. Without incurring any risk or discomfort children can reciprocate. They can share with their imaginary friends, help them overcome obstacles, and protect them from danger.

On another level imaginative play offers experience with real friends. Children learn to cooperate in assigning roles and developing an imaginary plot. They refine their ability to communicate as they use language to set the scene and move the play along. Most of all they learn that real friendship is a joint effort, sometimes harmonious and sometimes contentious, but always a matter of sharing common space and materials.

A second misconception about imaginative play is that it represents a way to escape reality. Some parents even view pretending as self deception or lying. More often they take a less extreme position, considering imaginative play to be a temporary phase in the life of children, soon to be replaced by schoolwork and a more realistic orientation. The pretending of young children is neither a trivial, temporary phase of development nor the first step toward a life of self delusion. Rather it is a means of coping with reality, and it continues, in altered form, to be

important at all ages.

Because imaginative play helps children cope with reality their preliminary dealing with any new experience is on an imaginary plane. Whether it promises to be pleasant or painful, joyous or terrifying, the prospect is first clarified through the imaginative powers of the mind. As adults we no longer act out these fantasies, but we have them nonetheless. Through our internalized pretending we adjust to new aspects of reality. We become more aware of their possible ramifications, and we are better prepared to deal with them on the plane of action--whether it be gathering more facts, trying to change a situation, or simply accepting our fate.

Young children are engaged in a similar process. Pretending helps them recognize the dimensions of new facts they have discovered about life. These ^{facets} / are both exciting and frightening. It is exciting to become aware that life means growth. This insight dominates imaginative play. Children try to get some feeling for what it must be like to be a parent, a driver, a shopper, a traveler, all those exciting roles that some day will be theirs. But growth also may be cut short by injury or illness, and ultimately must end in death. The pretending of young children reveals that they have become aware of the darker characteristics of life and are struggling to understand their implications too. Pretenders are shot and put in jail, they are cut open by doctors, monsters and other wild animals attack and eat them up. That these dead and maimed characters are invariably brought back to life, hale and hearty, only underscores the fact that young children are beginning to realize that it isn't really so.

Eventually children are ready to take the next step, talking more directly with others about these new ideas and feelings. Typically it takes a number of years before children can openly let go of the protection their fantasy play has provided. It takes time before they can freely acknowledge that they are too young to drive a car, that they are not on the verge of having a baby, that their power to forestall injury and death is limited. Yet the wonder is that it does not take longer, or that more children do not falter along the way. These first years of life represent a period of intense discovery. Ideas are uncovered that are truly mind boggling. Far from being a retreat from reality, imaginative play is a crucial mechanism for surviving the onslaught of new information.

A final misconception that supports a casual attitude toward pretending is the assumption that it is easy. After all, pretending is child's play, is it not? Indeed it is playful, but pretending also is a form of thinking, and both concentration and inspiration are needed to sustain a make believe scene. Children are involved in abstracting out key actions and props as they create particular roles. They are intellectually challenged to replicate environments they have seen, or to re-create sequences of behavior that have been observed.

Moreover, imaginative play helps children deal with the complex intellectual task of distinguishing between real and pretend. This necessary distinction, is sometimes difficult even for adults to make. It is hard to distinguish between what is really true and what we wish were true, or what we fear is true. Young children are bombarded with experiences in which the mixture of fantasy and reality is subtle and confusing. 5 Books, for example, tell of giants

and witches, and the imaginary children who must live with them. Television depicts imaginary scenes of violence, cartoon characters who defy gravity, puppets who have believable personalities. The children experience and remember dreams that seem very real. In all these situations experience with imaginative play gives children a handle for sorting out fantasy from reality. Pretending helps children recognize that the consequences of imaginary action differ from those of real action, and they can begin to apply this knowledge to other media. The story in a book, the show on television, the good or bad dream, each of these phenomena involve a similar kind of pretending.

The significance of imaginative play in the growth of young children is recognized in academic circles. During the last fifteen years a series of studies have clearly indicated that high levels of pretending are associated with cooperativeness, self control, and intelligence. These studies also have demonstrated that helping children elaborate their pretending has the effect of increasing social, emotional, and intellectual development. In the face of these findings it is striking that we continue to place more emphasis on teaching young children about letters, numbers, colors, and shapes than we place on helping them learn to pretend with others. We are so preoccupied with preparing our children for school that we do not see where their energies are focused. Virtually everything they do, everything they think about, is filtered through imagination. They role play, they tell stories, they make up songs, they build cars and houses, they draw.

Parents have the ability to tune into these channels also, and to share in this development. 6 Recently we completed a study

of 36 homes in which adults took a special interest in the pretending of young children. (Just Pretending, Prentice Hall, 1981) We found that both parents and children were enthusiastic about interacting on an imaginative level. Some of the parents entered whole heartedly into dramatic play and developed a special kind of intense friendship with their children. Zach's Grandpa, for example, took care of his grandson every day while Zach's mother was at work. They spent hours every day pretending together. Here is what we saw when we visited their home.

As we entered the living room Grandpa explained that the card table with a sheet over it was really a doghouse where the two of them lived as dogs. He pointed to a stove where Zach cooks hamburgers and said in a confidential but loud voice, "If he offers you one of those pretend hamburgers, don't eat it. They're terrible! He puts too much pepper on them." The singsong quality in Grandpa's voice signaled that he was not really serious, but he did not smile or give any other indication of joking.

Next Zach wanted his grandfather to catch a toy car when it rolled down an inclined board. Grandpa laid his arm across the bottom of the board to stop the car, but as soon as the car touched his arm, he yelled, "Ouch, ooh, ooh. You broke my arm. Better get your medical kit and fix me up." Grandpa described how Zach had been operating on him the other day: "I was really sick. He was pulling out cockroaches, sharks, and a rather large octopus." Again, not the slightest hint of sarcasm. Grandpa never broke the imaginary mental set.

Grandpa next enticed Zach into showing us the rocket ship that they use to go to the moon. As they entered the rocket ship,

which was a bedroom closet, Grandpa warned us: "If you want a rough ride, try this rocket ship. Awfully rough landings, and the takeoffs aren't very comfortable either. I don't think he quite knows how to operate this spaceship." Zach countered: "Sometimes it do easy landings." But true to form when Zach pressed a spot on the wall, Grandpa went sprawling on the floor as if he had received a terrific jolt. "Where you gonna land?" asked Grandpa. "On the moon," was the reply. "Make it an easy landing," Grandpa pleaded.

In their pretend world Zach was both inept and omnipotent. He was in charge, and he cooked hamburgers or drove a rocket ship with all the incompetence of a four year old. Yet Grandpa loved every minute of his suffering. The only consequence of Zach's imaginary bumbling were feelings of exhilaration for both Zach and his grandfather. As we prepared to leave, Grandpa called out a final warning: "Don't ever play poker with Zach--you'll lose the shirt off your back."

Other parents, who did not have the time or inclination to participate so extensively in imaginative play, found ways to insert brief interludes of pretending into their normal routines. Wendy's mother, for example, enjoyed sitting down for a few moments and letting her daughter pretend to cut, shampoo, and brush her hair. Or perhaps she might sit at the kitchen table, while Wendy pretended to take an order for doughnuts and coffee.. Some parents took brief shopping trips to stores run by their children or went for a ride on a bus or airplane piloted by their children. From time to time parents were struck by strange diseases and had to receive therapeutic shots from a child-doctor. 8

Many of the parents in our study reported that by watching

the imaginative play of their children and occasionally joining in, they gained access to their children's feelings. Listen, for example, to Todd's revealing speech about his fears. Wearing a Frankenstein mask he boasts about how unafraid he is:

Frankenstein is not scared of anything. He's not scared of fire at all. He's not scared of water at all. He's not afraid of noise bombs. He breaks them. And he's not afraid of spiders, and he's not afraid of kisses.

We can visualize many opportunities for Todd's parents to follow up on these themes. Frankenstein might like to become a fireman around the house, or a lifeguard. He might keep an imaginary spider inside the sugar bowl and pretend to feed it bits of food. He might be willing to let a teddy bear kiss his Frankenstein face.

Another function of imaginative play reported by the parents in our study is to resolve parent-child conflicts that might lead to power struggles. Laurel's mother, for example, found that her daughter would try all the strange looking pieces of food in a bowl of soup if she were pretending to catch fish. Brian's mother discovered that Brian was willing to take an afternoon nap if he could sleep under the bed and pretend he was a dog.

Perhaps the greatest reward that came to parents as a result of joining imaginative play was the opportunity to communicate their values. We found that the parents in our study tried to communicate a balance between two primary values--being strong and being compassionate. By supporting fantasy play, these parents were telling their children that it is alright to want to be powerful. And by participating directly in the play they demonstrated how cooperation, sharing, and kindness can be incorporated into imaginary visions of grandeur. Above all these parents communicated

respect for their children. By taking seriously the imaginative worldview of young children they in turn gained the respect of their youngsters. We firmly believe that because of this foundation of mutual respect these children in the years ahead will be more likely to ask their parents questions, to listen to their explanations, and to follow their rules.

Pretending with young children is not always refreshing or stimulating. Sometimes it is boring; sometimes it is too silly for an adult. There are many times when adults cannot drop what they are doing and join imaginative play. Our message is not that parents need to force themselves into the role of pretenders. Our message is simply that young children naturally live in a world that is highly imaginative, and that we can share this world with them because we too were once little children. The ability to see magic, to imagine that any object can talk and have a personality, is still inside of us. If we will but let ourselves go, when opportunities arise, we will re-enter the kingdom where normal limits of time and space no longer hold.